

# HYPERALLERGIC

Art **Reviews**

## Fifty Years Later, Artists Continue to Spread the Message of the Black Panther Party

An exhibition honors the struggles of African Americans from the politically militant 1960s to the present.



by Elisa Wouk Almino  
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Still from Holly Bass, "Root Work" (image courtesy the artist)

WASHINGTON, DC — In the midst of escalating racial tension at the American University and across the United States rises an exhibition that honors the struggles of African Americans from the politically militant 1960s to the present. *It Takes a Nation* at the American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center is a survey exhibition, featuring the work of the Black Panther's cultural minister Emory Douglas, the AfriCOBRA (African Commune of Bad Relative Artists) collective, and younger artists, who, in the tradition of their elders, are taking stock of the America they inherited. The exhibit hinges on the edicts of the 10-point program fostered by the Black Panther Party that made demands for the black community, including freedom and power, the need for education, affordable housing, land reparations, and the end of police brutality and the murder of black people.

In 2016, can we say progress has been made exponentially in the lives of millions of African Americans? It has been more than 40 years since the Supreme Court passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, pertaining to equal rights and protection for all citizens regardless of race, gender, sex, or national origin. The race riots of the '60s impacted more than 124 cities across the country and the assassination of Martin Luther King escalated the tension. In the midst of this turmoil rose the Black Panther Party; its members took into their own hands the welfare of black communities. The 14 emerging artists featured in the exhibit — in my view, the high point — have crafted

works that address race and politics in the US today, and expose, through a myriad of techniques, a process of evaluation, critique, and potential healing.



Wadsworth Jarrell, "Revolutionary (Angela Davis)" (1971), edition 275/300, serigraph on Wove paper, 26 x 33 in. (image courtesy the artist)

There is great diversity in *It Takes a Nation*, which is to be expected in a survey show such as this one. However, there is also a shared conceptual framework. In 1968, the AfriCOBRA artists outlined their principles of African American aesthetics: Kool-Aid colors, tight composition, accessibility to the masses, and the merging of foreground and background. This formula is represented in full force via the cofounder of AfriCOBRA Wadsworth Jarrell's iconic image of Angela Davis.



Installation view of 'It Takes a Nation' at the Katzen Art Center (photo by Greg Staley)



A number of works here reflect the early edicts of AfriCOBRA. Jeff Donaldson, one of the cofounders, painted “In the Valley of Eshu” (1971), which interweaves Yoruba and other African symbolism within a composition of a black couple that parallels Grant Wood’s “American Gothic” (1930). In “Contemporary Focus/Black Lives Matter” (2016), James Phillips uses brightly colored geometric forms based on Ashanti Adinkra symbols and Egyptian and Yoruba semiotic signs, superimposed on five mannequin heads that together form a circle, connoting unity and determination. And Frank Smith deconstructs the American flag into fragments, forming a frayed motley quilt in “Stars and Stripes Forever” (2013).



While the older artists lean toward fragmented images and intense color palettes, the younger artists tend to use white, red, and black — a color used to express puissance, and race. Some of the younger artists opt for elements of minimalism in concept and design, while others engage in the aesthetic of excess or jelly-tight compositions, referencing AfriCOBRA, as evidenced in the work of Amber Robles-Gordon, Stan Squirewell, and Njena Jarvis. On many levels, these artists build on concepts, in part, outlined by their elders and expound in new ways of delivering socio-political messages for a broad audience.



Installation view of 'It Takes a Nation' at the Katzen Art Center (photo by Greg Staley)

One of the standout pieces in the exhibit is “Dope Effect II” (2016) by [Shaunté Gates](#). Replete with a central video panel, this graphic painting is a tour de force. Flanked on either side of the five-panel work is a black-and-white profile of a naturally coiffed young woman and nestled in her locks is a single red poppy flower — a reoccurring motif in Gates’s work. The next panel features a hooded black male riding in a 1960s Lincoln Continental that morphs into charging bulls, with the hooded figure serving as a ubiquitous symbol for recent travesties enacted upon black men, like Trayvon Martin.

The video itself is densely layered with text from acclaimed writer [James Baldwin](#); Eisenhower’s warnings against the military industrial complex; the Black Panthers, Fred Hampton, and Bobby Seale; and a 1968 comment by Nixon, supporting the police’s use of coercion to subdue the political uprisings of the moment. Gates gives history lessons through his use of video, animation, graphics, and paint. His message: the US, again, is in a race-based crisis.



Still from Holly Bass, “Root Work”

[Holly Bass](#) takes a more personalized view of the shifts from the 1950s to the present for African Americans. “Root Work,” an installation of a wooden house with scrims on either side, shows projections of her performing a facsimile of a holy dance in a long, bleached white cotton dress and men’s work boots. In contrast to the dance is a projection of Bass conversing with her father. While standing in a vast cotton field, they discuss the picking of cotton and its economic implications, past and present. With grace, Bass, who migrated to the West during the Great Migration in the ‘60s, explores an intimate history, mitigating a southern origin through a West Coast prism.

Njena Jarvis, like James Phillips, appropriates forms based on indigenous African imagery. Using the idea of the Yoruba [Egungun](#) masquerade, Jarvis constructs a full-length black leather garment embossed with images of men and women donning Ray Ban shades and combat weapons. It may be that Jarvis chose this African masquerade because it’s represented as a powerful force — in traditional Yoruba



culture the Egungun protects the community, removes pestilence and even raises the dead.



Njena Jarvis, "E, Gun Gun" (2016), leather, rubber, wool, felt, gypsum, and glass, 7.5 x 4 x 4 ft. (image courtesy the artist)

Through these artists' eyes, the recent history of life for African Americans is reconstructed, with paint, sculpture, graphic design, mixed media, and performance art, alluding to the fact that in many ways things have not changed substantially from the past until now. Message-laden without being didactic, much of the art by the emerging artists functions within this conceptual framework.

*It Takes a Nation* gives us a moment to pause and reevaluate how to move forward. But I couldn't help but think of the 1968 "[Kerner Report](#)" issued by the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders — how it stated that there are two separate Americas, one black and the other white, and how it still resonates today. We are still left with the challenge of how to mitigate America's racial divide.

*It Takes a Nation continues at the American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center (4400 Massachusetts Ave NW, Washington, DC) through October 23.*